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Formosans

ll6, 787

A Formosan woman scarcely ever passes the altars of the gods without stopping to ask for advice; she tosses two little crescent-shaped pieces of wood in the air, lets them fall and reads the horoscope. Then she prays, throws the pieces of wood and burns incense or "money for the gods" until the fates tell her something pleasant. All this is done to the accompaniment of the little firecrackers, which are the favorite form of popular amusement in Formosa, as they are in China.

782 Sacrifices and food offered once to a god may be again offered to gods of lower rank. All the sacrifices are eventually consumed by those who offer them because gods are thought to require only the essence of each sacrifice.¹⁴

Prayers may be offered by a priest (usually a Taoist), who is paid to ask the gods for the patient's quick recovery, a safe birth, the removal of distress supposedly caused by evil spirits, etc. Prayers commonly heard in temples are not offered in order to seek strength to live a holy life but to ask for practical and immediate benefits.

B. Communication with Spirits

• 787 Since souls are popularly believed to live in Yin-chien, communication is possible through the media of Taoist practitioners. When someone wishes to communicate with those who are dead, he may ask a medium, usually a devout woman of the faith, to go to a Taoist priest practicing spiritualism. Before the presence of a god, the priest places the medium in a trance. In the trance the medium meets the dead soul through the guidance of the god and is able to answer questions which

14. Masuda, op. cit., pp. 86-88.

787 the seeker wishes to ask. The questions may pertain to the circumstances in which the soul has left the Yang-chien, the conditions of life in Yin-chien, the causes of misfortune which now exist in the family, etc.¹⁵

Hung-i [a sorceress] also renders services as a medium to the spiritual world. She may ask the gods in heaven or spirits wandering in the universe to descend and dwell in her so that the inquirer may directly converse with the gods or spirits involved in a particular problem. One may ask the hung-i such questions as: "Where may medicine for the sick be obtained?" "Will the expected birth be easy or difficult?" "Where can lost treasure be found?" "Are the dead happy and how do they live in Yin-chien?" An interesting saying, "Your mouth is exactly like that of a hung-i," (meaning that you are as great a liar as a hung-i), is used in irony and suggests the combination of belief and distrust with which

15. Seiichiro Suzuki, Taiwan kyukan - kankon sosai to nenchu gyoji [Traditional Customs of Taiwan - Coming-of-age, Marriage, Funeral, Ancestor Worship and Annual Events], Taihoku, Taiwan nichinichi shimposha, 1934, pp. 52-54.

- 787 the people of Formosa regard the practice of sorcery.¹⁶

C. Taboo

787 The belief that the world is full of spirits which control all aspects of life and
791 every part of the universe has led to a system of taboo. A doubtful science called feng-shui (literally meaning "wind and water") is concerned with a study of the spirits dwelling in earth and mountains. The breaking of earth for the purpose of erecting a house, opening a mine, or digging a grave site at a certain time and on a certain date can begin only after a geomancer has assured the questioner that the spirits concerned will not be disturbed. For more or less the same reason, the date of a marriage or the time a funeral procession should begin is determined by a fortuneteller.

787 It should be made clear that these beliefs and practices are observed by a limited number of people among those who

16. Keirai So, Taiwan shukyo to meishin roshu [Religion and Superstitious Practices in Taiwan], Taihoku, Taiwan shukyo kenkyukai, 1938, pp. 34-44.

- 787 adhere to the folk-religion. With the advance of science and Western education, the belief in communication with the spirits of the dead and the various forms of taboo will lose much of their force. However, their influence on the religious life of the people in Formosa still seems to remain far stronger than that of Christianity.

IV. GOVERNMENT POLICY TOWARD RELIGION

771 Since the establishment of the Republic of China, the government has assumed an attitude of "non-interference" toward religious practices. Confucianism, which is a system of ethnical principles rather than a religion, receives official support and encouragement in matters of education and propaganda. On the birth day of Confucius, heads of central and local governments become chief priests in worshiping and commemorating the great sage.

Of the greater number of government officials who have begun to observe Christian services, some may have done so, in part, because the wish for co-operation with the West, particularly with the United States, is growing. Church attendance, however, is by no means widespread.